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ABSTRACT

Although evaluation plays many roles in schools--support for administrative decision-making, curriculum improvement, staff development, public relations, instruction, counseling, diagnosing problems for students and staff, planning--recent studies of school district evaluation practices indicate that little overall consistency exists in the form of evaluation used by small schools. Three evaluation strategies for school leaders with few resources and limited time are reviewed. The Program Review Committee Approach for Curriculum Evaluation involves establishing a committee which reviews one or two programs each year and makes recommendations, with the approval of the school superintendent, to the school board. The Problem-Solving Approach for School Improvement requires an annual pre-school year stocktaking at the building level to inventory the strengths and weaknesses of the school; priorities are then set to address deficiencies during the school year. The Discrepancy Approach for Assessing School Needs and Planning has staff members define what they believe are ideal characteristics for their school. The principal then organizes the characteristics into a description against which discrepancies can be compared. This approach keeps a school developing in the direction of the collective vision of its staff. Through systematic evaluation, staff members can work together to improve the quality of their schools. (JMM)

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SMALL SCHOOLS DIGEST

APPROACHING EVALUATION IN SMALL SCHOOLS

Evaluation can have variable forms and functions in small schools. This digest reviews these and describes three evaluation strategies that school leaders with few resources and limited time may use to monitor quality and to establish directions for school improvement. It is hoped that this digest might stimulate the sharing of information about these and many other evaluation strategies that can work in small school settings.

What is the status of evaluation in small schools?

Elementary and secondary educators generally agree that it is important to look at the quality of the services they provide their students and communities. Since evaluation is often thought of as the process of determining quality of schools and how to improve them, then it should be an integral part of all school operations.

We know that the largest school systems of the United States invest heavily in evaluation functions (Lyon & Others, 1978; Stufflebeam, 1980). However, as the sizes of school districts decrease there seems to be less effort invested in school evaluation (Lyon & Others, 1978; Kennedy & Others, 1980). Formal evaluations in small school districts are typically done by university-based consultants, but colleges and universities are not always accessible (Adams, 1971; Baker, 1977).

Scriven (1973) has identified several roles that evaluation can play in schools. These include support for administrative decision-making, curriculum improvement, staff development, public relations, instruction, counseling and diagnosing problems for students and staff, and planning.

Cool (1977, in Sanders, 1978) has also described elements in a school district that could become focal points for evaluation. These include the following:

1. general needs assessments
2. individual needs assessments
3. resource allotment
4. processes or strategies for providing services to learners, such as:
   - —curriculum design
   - —classroom processes
   - —materials of instruction
   - —monitoring of pupil progress
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In many ways, evaluation can contribute to excellence in education and to educational improvement. Recent studies of school district evaluation practices (Kennedy & Others, 1980; King & Others, 1982; Sanders, 1983) indicate that small school districts with limited funds do participate in this process, but not in a coordinated, systematic, and well-communicated way.

It has, for example, been found that teachers often use evaluation processes for solving individual problems of instruction and classroom management, but they do so without consulting other instructors. Standardized and teacher testing is common practice, but those practices are often not well developed or coordinated. Curriculum changes are frequently made through informal evaluation, and sometimes through benign neglect. Priorities for inservice and other professional development activities are set through these informal evaluation processes, with little utilization of data or discussion. New materials and methods are tried out and evaluated without much sharing of findings. Little overall consistency exists in the forms of evaluation which small schools use.

The one element that seems to be almost universally missing is an attempt to make evaluation activities systematic, i.e., planned, purposive, cyclical, comprehensive, and well-communicated. Systematic evaluation could improve communication and utilization of the outcomes of evaluation work and improve the efficiency of the many forms of evaluation in small schools. Evaluation has not been more systematic in the past in small schools for several reasons:

1. Evaluation expertise (i.e., staff with formal training in educational evaluation) is not often available in small schools. Related to this limitation is the existence of many misconceptions about evaluation.
2. Time available to staff for taking on formal evaluation tasks is very limited.
3. Resources, including evaluation instruments and funds for evaluation, are nearly nonexistent.

In recent years there have been many attempts at overcoming these constraints in order to realize the potential that evaluation processes have for enhancing small schools functioning. Three such attempt will be described as evaluation strategies that have worked in small settings.

What kinds of evaluation strategies are useful for small schools?

1. The Program Review Committee Approach for Curriculum Evaluation.

A Program Review Committee (PRC) is established. It can be a districtwide committee composed of the superintendent or assistant superintendent for instruction, and elementary principal, a junior high principal, department chairpersons (secondary), grade level chairpersons (elementary), and an instructional specialist. Or, it can be a building level committee composed of the superintendent or assistant superintendent for instruction, the principal, grade level chairperson (elementary) or department chairpersons (secondary), and an instructional specialist. An advantage of a district-wide PRC is K-12 articulation; a major disadvantage is the logistics involved in getting people together.

Each year the PRC conducts a thorough review of one or two programs (e.g., language arts, mathematics, sciences, social studies, arts, physical education, counseling, special education, vocational and technical). A schedule is established so that a program undergoes a thorough review once every 5 years.

Grade and/or department level committees are established to study their areas of responsibility on a continuing basis, make minor changes as needed, and compile data and proposals for more changes (e.g., textbook selection, testing, course offerings, curriculum design or objectives, equipment and facilities) that are presented formally to the PRC when the 5 year review is con-

ducted. These committees conduct and keep records of ongoing needs assessment for their areas, look at alternative models, materials, and objectives for better approaches to instruction and meeting student needs, and try out pilot programs during the 4 years that they are not up for review. Their fifth year presentation to the PRC is based on the previous 4 years of effort.

The PRC reviews program proposals and budget presentations, gather additional data as needed during the year-long review of a program area, and then presents recommendations, with the approval of the superintendent, to the school board in a regularly scheduled spring meeting. Major decisions—covering items such as budget allocation, curriculum development, course offerings, testing, staffing, inservice, new materials, equipment, or facilities—are then made by the school board for a 5 year period.

2. The Problem-Solving Approach for School Improvement. At the building level, an annual pre-school year stocktaking is held on a day in August preceding the opening of school. The principal conducts the session with all professionals defining the strengths and weaknesses of the school from criteria for excellent schools developed by the principal and staff. Then, priorities are set regarding deficiencies to address during the school year. Committees for studying the selected problems and for presenting recommendations for change are then established, and discussions or idea-sharing about how each committee will proceed is conducted. Finally, the day ends by identifying any needs for outside reviewers or assistance and making plans for getting this help.

Each committee then proceeds with its own plan and schedule until mid-winter, at which time recommendations and justification for changes within the school are made to the full faculty. Each committee proposal includes a clear statement and documentation of the problem or need, objectives for change, and a recommended strategy for change. Those proposals deemed satisfactory are then implemented and evaluated with a review of the effectiveness of the changes at a post-school year stocktaking meeting after the close of school. Problems or needs that seem to be unsolvable are discussed and brainstormed by the principal and faculty at the mid-winter meeting. As needed, consultants are brought in, special development projects are planned, and/or thorough searches for workable solutions that have been developed elsewhere are undertaken with a report presented at the annual post-school year stocktaking session.

The annual stocktaking day is used to inventory the strengths and weaknesses of the school, to discuss what remains to be done on work undertaken the past year, to evaluate changes that were implemented the past year, and to discuss evaluation and improvement plans for the next year.

3. The Discrepancy Approach for Assessing School Needs and Planning. Again at the building level, the staff members in a small school district can define what they believe are ideal characteristics for their school. This can be done through discussion of the characteristics teachers would look for if they were evaluating another school. Alternatively, the principal could interview every teacher at the beginning of the year about the characteristics each believes makes up a good school. These values can be supplemented by characteristics found in accreditation standards and in research literature about descriptions of effective schools.

The principal organizes the resulting defined characteristics by the categories of: (1) school organization (grade structure, personnel assignments, school calendar, time schedules, the image of the educated student, pacing, availability of services); (2) curriculum (effectiveness, comprehensiveness, materials, resources, meeting student needs); (3) school climate (standards, expectations, student/staff respect and trust, enthusiasm for learning, availability of support, attendance, vandalism, physical plant, recognition of achievements); and (4) instruction (interruptions, testing and grading, practice, grouping, leadership, professional development, support).

Once written, this description of the ideal for the school becomes a common vision for all to strive for. Realizing that no school is perfect, however, and that there is always room for improvement, teachers could be asked in a staff meeting to underline wherever they believe their school deviates from its vision and when this is important enough to warrant attention. On a blank piece of paper teacher and the principal can list what they underlined and describe what, in particular, needs work. A staff member can collect the papers, tabulate how many times different discrepancies were listed and report back at a later staff meeting where the clusters of concerns seem to be. Then, staff task forces composed of those who feel strongly enough to want to work on a problem area can be formed and project plans formulated. If done every 3 years or so, this evaluation approach will help keep a school dynamic and developing in the direction of the collective vision of its staff.

Summary

These brief descriptions show what small schools can do to overcome evaluation difficulties. Through systematic evaluation, the staff of these schools can work together—with leadership evolving according to the need—to improve the quality of their schools. More descriptions of workable evaluation strategies for small schools are needed, and research on the utility of the different models for school improvement and on ways to integrate evaluation into the routines of small school district operations are needed. It is hoped that this digest may engender that development.

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Prepared by

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January 1988

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS DIGEST

EDO-RC-88-03

Approaching Evaluation In Small Schools

By

James R. Sanders

January 1988

ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

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